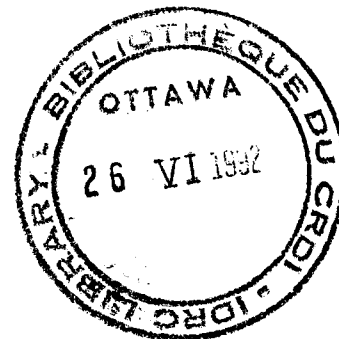


SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH: WHAT TO DO?

Report on Regional Consultations



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Social Policy Research: What to do?

Human development problems generated by the crisis of the 1980's and the changes introduced in several Latin American countries' economic and political systems make designing efficient and effective social interventions urgent. Unfortunately, the knowledge needed to carry out these interventions is insufficient. It is not easy to successfully confront this situation, since the human, institutional and financial resources needed to support research are scarce. A methodological proposal for identifying research priorities, which in the case of social policy is an especially complex task, is required.

The methodological proposal presented in this work does not divide topics according to sectors such as education, health, employment, housing, social welfare or social security. There are several reasons for this. First, the need for an integral focus on human development problems targeted by social policy has led to a search for an inter-sectoral focus, to the possible extent (Torres, 1991). Secondly, the State's shortage of human and financial resources, as well as the privatization trend of social services, make joint institutional efforts compulsory. Thirdly, the problems confronted by social policy in each social sector do not vary. Finally, given its difficulty in responding to social problems, re-structuring the state's apparatus needs to be considered; the present sectoral structure should not be thought of as permanent.

Consequently, this document assumes that social policy research should focus on both the crucial aspects of the policy-making process, and on the critical aspects of human development. In other words, research has to reach the basic policy contents, while emphasizing both the dynamics of social policy itself and of its target. To that end, discussion centers on two questions: "How to act?", and "With whom to act?".

This work is based on discussions held during a series of regional consultations in Latin America (1). Methods included in-depth interviews with researchers and planners, review of some social programs and interventions, analysis of results of specially-requested consultancies (2), and recommendations resulting from workshops organized in several countries (3). In a sense, this paper is a summary of many views obtained during this process. However, it seeks to go further by developing a methodological proposal for identifying social policy research priorities. This approach, it must be stressed, is not aimed at discussing new or existing social policies, but rather at examining what might be done.

Regarding the above, a comment is necessary. The discussion on social policy research priorities cannot be separated from that on social policy priorities. Research should be carried out to support and evaluate current policies or to propose new ones. In this respect, the region's situation is a varied one. There are countries with new social policy proposals, countries already applying new policies, and others still using the traditional formats (4). On the other hand, planners and researchers seem to somehow agree on what social policy priorities should be. The methodology followed to prepare this document implicitly allowed all this to be taken into account, considering it enough as a starting point. As it has already been argued (Torres, 1991), the pressing situation, coupled with the lack of available knowledge, does not allow much time for conceptual discussions. New policy contents will have to be specified while being designed and applied.

HOW TO ACT? - RELEVANT ASPECTS OF THE PROCESS

Faced with urgent social intervention needs, several criteria, including the following, may be used to develop a methodological proposal:

- Priority areas for sectoral or inter-sectoral work, such as child mortality in health, drop-outs in education, juvenile unemployment in labour, or nutrition in health and education.
- Type of desired impact, such as poverty reduction, increased service quality or greater effectiveness of policies (Abugattas, 1991; Vergara, 1991).
- Strategic policy phases, such as diagnosis, design, application, monitoring or evaluation (Schkolnik, 1991).
- Operational aspects, such as appropriate selection instruments, financing mechanisms, competitiveness or effective management capacity (Sojo, 1991).

This proposal takes some of these criteria into account, but emphasizes relevant aspects of the process of social policy design, application and evaluation. Current circumstances do not require so much indication of social policy goals, on which there is apparent consensus, as of how the goals may be reached, and how their results might be measured. From this perspective, critical aspects of the policy-making process would be target population identification, institutional aspects and management, efficiency, sustainability, information, and evaluation.

Identification of the Target Population

Scarcity of resources and the need for in-depth intervention require more precise methodologies to identify beneficiaries or target populations. This will improve the focus on activities and evaluation of social policy's re-distributive effects. There are two basic considerations to be taken into account: how to focus activities and what to do once the target has been identified.

The identification process involves four aspects: (i) definition, (ii) inclusion, (iii) specification of supply and demand, and (iv) provision.

(i) For the definition of target populations, several criteria have been proposed. They are not exclusive, but lead to different results. These criteria include:

- The situation of social risk. In this case, indicators such as child and maternal mortality, morbidity due to infectious diseases, malnutrition, social abandonment, unemployment or social marginality are typically used (Abugattas, 1991). The emphasis here is to examine groups with health, psychological or economic survival problems.
- The group's social potential. In this case, age identifies infants, children, adolescents and young adults as typical groups. The idea is to focus upon development of capacities and learning skills in the medium and long term, rather than to solve short-term social problems.
- Precariousness of economic and labour positions in the productive structure. This criterion

usually identifies groups such as small entrepreneurs in the informal sector, peasants, traditional fishermen, etc. (Schkolnick, 1991). The entry point is a given group's economic vulnerability.

Development, application and operational evaluation of these criteria is a high-priority topic in social policy methodological research. The reason is that for practical purposes, identification of target populations is both the beginning and the end of all policy processes. No service delivery is possible, no impact evaluations may be carried out unless the beneficiaries are clearly defined.

(ii) Once the group has been defined, it is included in specific programs. Several criteria may be used:

- Self-identification by the potential beneficiaries, as is the case with young people enrolling in re-training programs or adolescents seeking guidance.
- Residence in specific neighbourhoods, marginal zones or rural areas; in this case, the activity involves an entire community.
- Needs indicated by some type of standard measures. To this end, periodic surveys have been made using specially-designed questionnaires (Schkolnick, 1991; Sojo, 1991).

Inclusion of target populations is not an easy issue to resolve. Groups with social needs do not always express them, make demands or make use of services. There seems to be a positive relationship between poverty levels, social marginalization and the inability to make demands. The poor and those with a particular social need do not always have available channels to express their demands and many of them are voiceless -the marginal rural poor; temporary migrant workers who, due to their type of employment, have no labour union or lack access to the social security system; unemployed youth who, due to their lack of prior experience, are left out of the labour market; and pregnant adolescents who hide their condition, just to list a few.

(iii) The next step is to specify the contents of the demands and the capacity for supply. Aspects such as factors conditioning a demand's existence, its' contents, and the cost of accessing to services must be considered. In particular, the topic of whether those requesting the service are those who need it most must be answered. The perception and use of social services tends to be lower among more disadvantaged social strata. This, among other things, contributes to the fact that the intended population is not always a program's real beneficiary. The service delivery process may deviate from its original target when the service or benefit in question is provided.

(iv) Once the demand is specified, the next step is to study what should be provided. One thing is to focus activities on specific groups, and another is to determine what is to be given. Research should assist in determining whether this should be training, credit assistance, technical assistance, advice and orientation, etc. Likewise, the policy's philosophical basis should be defined: Will assistance be emphasized, or will promotion for creation and development of abilities be accented? Are the determinants of poverty -or of any other situation of need- external to those suffering it, or must the needy make efforts that only they can make (Irrarázabal, 1991)? For example, an assistance approach would focus on studying effective distribution of benefits. A promotional approach would concentrate on development of abilities and service payment opportunities in an open market situation.

Analysis of Institutional Aspects and Management

Social policies are applied within institutional frameworks that do not always favour these policies. Whereas in other areas -for example, macro-economic or national defense policies- there are clear authority structures, this is not the case in the social area (Molina, 1991). Here, inter- sectoral agreement mechanisms within the State and between the State and the society in general have yet to be developed. One of the topics requiring urgent study is how to apply inter-sectoral policies within an institutional framework which will continue to be sectoral.

The issue of how sectoral institutions are to plan, apply and evaluate integral social policies has not been resolved yet. Institutional prerequisites for the most efficient and effective social policy application must be examined: Which is the framework to apply new social policies? Within that framework, what sort of new institutional arrangements are desirable and viable? This study must be made at the central, regional and local government levels, especially in those countries planning to de-centralize social programs (Vergara, 1991). Legal, normative and organizational aspects must be re-examined. Coordination between public and private sector activities, including NGOs dedicated to development activities, private research centers, universities and business is particularly important.

Decentralization is a growing regional trend. There are several questions which must be answered as quickly as possible: What are the results of the first experiences in social program decentralization? What should be decentralized and what should remain under central government control? What and how to decentralize, for example, in education, health and social security (Urrutia, 1991)? Other related questions include: What coordination and follow-up mechanisms should be applied? What should the limits of territorial and social differentiation of programs be in order to avoid affecting equity of results?

Many countries are tending to grant more autonomy to local municipal government. However, real municipal management capacity is somewhat unknown. At this level, despite being close to the beneficiary, activities are not integrated. The practice of sectoral program execution is an obstacle to integral program management.

It is important to know the management capacity of organizations working at the community level, such as schools, medical centers, social service agencies, and NGOs. Their capacity to attract, generate and manage resources must be studied. Some research efforts have been made in this direction, and there is some information available. However, it is not enough. It is necessary to identify obstacles originating from laws and norms, routine practices and perceptions of personnel, and their level of training and commitment. Likewise, the real ability of the so-called grass-roots organizations to sustain programs must be studied (Helfer, 1991). No one denies the need to decentralize and provide greater participation. However, social participation has not been clearly defined yet, nor have the mechanisms that should be used to promote and achieve it (Vergara, 1991). A key consideration is reinforcement or design of mechanisms of social control for those who conceive, apply or evaluate social policies. How may greater accountability be achieved?

Efficiency

There is an amount of public resources which, although diminished in relative or absolute terms, funds existing social policies. In this respect, we must first of all examine the rationale of public expenditure (Cohen, 1991). How is expenditure taking place? What is the level of

policy efficiency in cost-benefit terms? Which are the prices of services? What portion of the invested resources reaches the beneficiaries? The problem is not so much insufficient funds, as wasted resources due to inefficient bureaucratic practices or corruption. The key question is how to achieve efficiency with the same amount of resources (Urrutia, 1991; Sojo, 1991).

The following are some examples of specific topics that would have to be studied in depth and widely discussed:

- Structure of public expenditure on social policy. Prices of social services. Cost recovery modalities (Londoño, 1991).
- Private expenditure of NGOs and the population in general on service provision and consumption.
- Analysis of subsidies, including their recommended duration. What can the population provide and what should be subsidized? How to subsidize without creating dependency?
- Follow-up systems for public expenditure and its destination.
- Alternatives for spending scarce available resources. Is the State the only alternative? May public spending be carried out by private agencies, with supervision and control by the State? May greater efficiency be achieved by privatizing social services?

Sustainability

A vital consideration in social policies is how to sustain them through time, making them resistant to changes in subsidy policies, lack of foreign aid, impact of other policies, and instability in available institutional and human resources.

With respect to financial resources, several important topics may be mentioned:

- Fiscal instruments to finance social policies (Londoño, 1991).
- Available private sector resources and how to attract them.
- Contributions to be made by the target population.
- Financial circuits which local governments may utilize.

The general issue in this case is constituted by the alternatives that may be tested to combine fiscal and private resources, State and private management, and control and monitoring by the State and social organizations. To date, the use of State modalities has predominated.

The impact of other policies on social program sustainability makes it specially interesting to study the positive and negative impact of macro-economic, fiscal and tax policies (Londoño, 1991). Likewise, the benefits of appropriate social policies for the sustainability of economic programs and other policies related to productive transformation, technological innovation and environmental conservation must be revealed. The economic costs of unsuitable social policies are unknown, making it impossible to document their interrelationship with economic investment.

With respect to human and institutional resources, the ministries' and local governments' technical weakness makes it necessary to develop alternatives for rapid re-training of public-sector personnel. These alternatives should emphasize management abilities, in order to develop the necessary management resources (Sojo, 1991). To this end, the possible role of universities should be examined, as well as the type of institutional adjustment they require in order to meet future needs in training new professionals.

Information

It may be said that the region lacks information, but not data. Social policy information research must be geared towards facilitating management and evaluation. Methodological research must seek to improve, simplify and make use of existing data to generate more adequate information with the current public and private institutional and human resources, and to obtain sufficiently refined social indicators for specific social interventions. Among the most important topics, the following may be noted:

- Situational and social trend analysis (analyses of poverty, quality of life or social integration levels and their tendency to increase or decrease) (Webb, 1991).
- Monitoring and evaluation of program execution. Information systems and social indicators desegregated by area, department and municipality or district.
- Integration of existing information systems at the national or regional levels, in order to have a diagnostic base for integrated and inter-sectoral programs.
- More efficient use of existing information services, specially by the population. Design of decentralized information systems allowing free access to diverse users and capture of information generated by NGOs, including their results. Open information systems are needed to create a well-informed public opinion.
- Articulation between situational and social tendency indicators with service provision indicators. Data on representative services or programs for follow-up and evaluation activities (Webb, 1991). Articulation of social and economic indicators to examine the mutual impact of social and economic policies (Echeverri, 1991).
- Qualitative data to complement quantitative data, in order to provide information on service coverage and quality.
- International comparative analysis for development of national and regional evaluation methods (Urrutia, 1991).

Evaluation

In general, the relationship between social program returns and expected improvement of equality and social equity levels must be studied.

Evaluation included in program follow-up is indispensable to incorporate the criterion of quality into activities. Social policy evaluation must particularly focus upon the continuous

control of quality; evaluations at the end of the day may not be as useful as evaluations during the process of policy implementation.

How to incorporate the beneficiaries' perceptions in evaluation processes is a subject that also has to be studied. In addition, objective service evaluation criteria must be developed. Research on social control mechanisms to create greater accountability is fundamental.

Identification of channels through which social programs affect economic development is crucial. The profitability of social policies must be determined in order to complement their ethical defense with economic reasons to be presented before authorities managing the national or local budget, as well as to the public opinion (Londoño, 1991). In other words, the capacity to demonstrate that social policies are also an economic "investment" rather than just an "expense", and that they are useful as well as desirable, must be developed.

Evaluation research must include how social services are being used and how relevant the offer is to needs.

Finally, prospective research must identify social policy scenarios (Schkolnick, 1991). To this end, technical evaluation results that indicate social policy's re-distributive impact and achievement of greater social equity are needed.

WITH WHOM TO ACT? - CRITICAL LIFE TRANSITIONS

Although the opportunity to raise thematic issues concerning social policies was open during the consultations carried out for this work, the discussions always turned to the policy-making process. Research priorities were apparently more referred to the process than to contents. However, given the wide scope of social policies, the points raised in the previous section are not sufficient, even if they may help to delimit priorities. It was interesting to observe that no unique criteria to select substantive social policy themes emerged from the discussions. That is why a theoretical-methodological concept that could help select substantive areas for social policy is proposed.

A most risky aspect is to decide what strategic research to carry out in a particular field when there is a lack of knowledge on causal relations explaining the phenomena under consideration. The complexity of human development makes this particularly difficult in the case of social policies. As a way to deal with this matter, it was argued that social policies, and by extension research on them, should be guided by a systemic approach (Torres, 1991). There appears to be consensus on this point of view. However, turning this theoretical approach into an operative instrument within the framework of a methodological proposal is not easy.

A proposal based on the idea that human development has critical stages which must be appropriately faced in order to avoid cumulative negative effects on the individual and the society is presented below. The basic concept is critical life transition. Critical life transitions are periods of human life when crucial personal development does not depend so much on the individual but rather on a cluster of social actors, processes and structures. Critical life transitions involve social problems which are not sectoral or do not pertain to disciplines, nor are they those of isolated individuals, or single institutions or organizations.

In light of existing social knowledge, it is plausible to say that there are crucial social and biological transitions in a person's evolutionary process. During these transitions, a complex socialization process including development of capacities, knowledge appropriation, learning of

abilities and acquisition of the values needed for the individual's social integration, takes place. In the classic social sciences, the closest idea to the critical life transition concept is that of passage from one stage to the next within the socialization process: birth, puberty, adulthood, marriage, family formation, retirement and death have been examined in detail in modern and traditional societies. For our purposes, this classical conceptualization is too individualistic. However, it is an interesting reference concept for it permits to discuss about certain life periods during which individuals, families and even whole communities are closely linked by specific social problems.

Based on different results of available social research, experts' opinions, and interests expressed by many population groups, this proposal seeks to concentrate social policy research efforts on four critical life transitions which will be called initial development, early social incorporation, adult social integration, and retirement. Evidence indicates that problems occurring during these transitions have cumulative effects on human development, affecting a variety of spheres in personal and social life.

Initial Development

Initial development refers to a period of life that may go even from before conception to the second or third year of life, passing through gestation, birth and initial survival. It is a transition that involves the child and the mother, as well as a set of other groups and institutions from their social environment. Under a social policy perspective, the focus should not be limited to the mother and child dyad, but should also include groups such as adolescents and youth in pre-marriage and pre-parenthood stages, pregnant women, recently-formed families, new-born infants, and children of up to two or three years of age.

It is a critical life transition for the adolescent seeking sexual and family orientation, for the recently-formed couple seeking family planning services, for the pregnant teenager, for the families of all these individuals, for the new-born infant and for children during their first years of life. The following seem to be the most outstanding social problems to be researched:

- Adolescent fertility and fertility with short inter-birth intervals.
- Maternal and child mortality and morbidity.
- Infant physical and psychomotor development.
- Mother and child cognitive learning and affective development.

The social problems which occur during this transition are not independent from one another; on the contrary, they form a cluster which should be considered from a systemic perspective upon the individual's initial development. It is not a matter of observation from a sectoral perspective, because these problems can only be effectively treated in an integral manner.

The lack of solutions to the above-mentioned problems generates a cascade of negative effects at both the individual and societal levels. Sexual disorientation leading to undesired pregnancies, poorly-managed pregnancies, birth in precarious conditions, inadequately stimulated or abandoned infants are not necessarily separate events. These problems mean that an incomplete or poor transition is taking place, not only for the child -the process' central reference point- but also for the mother, the couple, the family and even the community. Inadequate solutions to problems in this transition lead to piling of negative effects to be later observed, for example, in children with multiple biological, psychological and social problems that limit their development and prevent them from easy transition to school; frustrated and

humiliated adolescents and young mothers facing additional and undesired pregnancies, abortion problems and social and psychological maladjustment; disintegrated families; high levels of maternal and child morbidity and mortality. Successful social interventions during this life transition may avoid enormous social, economic and psychological costs. Adequate support at this moment may increase the probability of successful transitions later on.

The groups of aspects and actors involved in this transition have been separately analyzed. However, available social research indicates that these problems should be solved in an integral way. This is a great challenge which must nevertheless be successfully confronted in order to produce effective interventions. As examples, the following two cases might be considered. The first refers to adolescent pregnancy. The prevention, treatment and follow-up actions required to solve this problem have to involve sexual education, specialized health care, education in child care, assistance and orientation for the adolescent's family, and even orientation for the local school's staff -it has been observed that in some countries pregnant girls are expelled. The second refers to the psychomotor development of infants from birth to the first or second year of life. This case demands orientation programs for mothers, evaluation of day-care centers' programs, improvement of women's labour conditions, community support programs for families in critical situations and nutrition support programs.

Early Social Incorporation

In the case of Latin America, this life transition refers to entrance to the formal education system. The center of attention is the child entering school, but parents, school teachers, those in charge of school nutrition programs and local school officials, pre-school education programs and community programs are also included. This is a critical transition for the child because his/her future educational opportunities and standard of living are strongly conditioned by the initial success or failure.

During this transition, elemental but fundamental learning abilities must be developed and skills acquired for reading, writing and numerical analysis. At this stage, it is important to provide for example educational support to children with learning problems, to orient parents, to mobilize the community to re-capture school drop-outs, to make school activities compatible with community and family productive activities, to provide nutritional support, re-train teachers. This is another cluster of needs to be systemically faced.

The most prominent social problems for high-priority policy research are:

- Deficient pre-school preparation and elemental but fundamental learning abilities and skills.
- Insufficient basic learning, particularly reading, writing and numeric analysis.
- Failure and repetition in the first years of school.
- As a consequence of the latter, definitive dropping out of school.

Educational research indicates that the child who fails in the early years of education, repeats it, and that in the long term the repeater leaves school. The family suffers social frustration, the child grows up feeling himself diminished, and dropping out is often conducive to early work, which reinforces entrapment in a situation from which it is very difficult to escape.

There is another cascade of positive or negative effects stemming from this critical life

transition. It is known that incomplete primary education is later on associated with high fertility rates, lack of knowledge about preventive health care practices, limited access to skilled labour, deficient learning capacities, etc. The cumulative negative impact on the personal and social level is enormous and its cost to society is immeasurable. Societies pay very high economic social costs for a population with diminished personal self-concepts and minimal learning capacities. Even in the case of countries with low school failure or repetition rates, the cost of having a literate population can more than double if children must wait until the end of their primary studies to be able to read, write and count well. The provision of timely support at this moment may lead to a different future for both the person and the society.

Adult Social Integration

This critical life transition revolves around inclusion in the labour market. Therefore, it may be initiated at different ages and embrace a variable number of years depending on when it occurs: upon leaving primary or secondary school, after graduation from secondary school, or during or upon ending higher education. This stage is more than moving from school into the world of work. It means incorporation into society's adult world, supposedly with all the citizen's rights and obligations.

The key social problems making this transition difficult, and where research efforts should be concentrated are:

- Incomplete basic education and lack of minimal learning abilities;
- Incompatibility between the expectations, knowledge and abilities acquired at school and the university, and the market's demands and possibilities;
- Poor access to minimal health and social security services, particularly those associated with forming a family; and
- Lack of minimally-informed participation in local political decision processes, where this is possible.

Since the cumulative effect of the problems experienced in previous transitions is felt here, both target populations and actors involved in social policy are dramatically multiplied -youngsters of different ages and abilities, the formal school system and its teachers, the public and private higher education sector, vocational schools, the government and private entrepreneurial sectors in all their industrial diversity- thus complicating the situation even further.

Education probably receives most of the attention because of its relation to employment, but the cluster of related problems reflects the complexities faced by youth entering adulthood. The most visible negative aspect of an inadequate transition is in this case unemployment and underemployment. There are, however, other ill effects whose economic costs are difficult to estimate. Personal, family, and even collective frustration produced by education which does not lead to employment that fills the individual's expectations, the impossibility of carrying out a personal development project, the difficulties and later obstacles in forming a family are some consequences which may be mentioned. These phenomena, through time, erode a society's human potential. In many cases, the situation is just the result of unsolved problems in previous transitions. Constant, and in some cases growing, entry of youth in the above conditions make a society's productive transformation capacity, economic competitiveness and

technological development almost impossible.

In some cases, the social, economic and political price is very high: violence, marginality, and lack of interest in a just and democratic society; involvement in illicit economic activities which, as in the case of drug trafficking, suffocate the viability of new economic and political development models. In some countries, the cost of violence may be valued in billions of dollars.

As in the previous cases, appropriate intervention to reverse or at least mitigate the situation may have an enormous social and economic return. Research must include aspects related to education, the business sector's needs, technological innovation, youth assistance programs and social welfare policies. Social and economic investment in this stage may have lasting effects far beyond the youthful stage of those involved.

Retirement

Another important social transition refers to the change from active life to different types of retirement. This transition certainly does not begin with retirement, but much before. It involves the population reaching Third Age, their close relatives and the community.

Compared with previous life transitions, the set of social problems is here apparently small. Two major research areas appear:

- Retirement and pension systems.
- Health services.

The social security and pension system crisis indicates that the region's societies have not been very far-seeing. This topic requires high-priority attention, since Latin American societies are aging and pressure for services for the mature and elderly will increase.

Once again, the situation is a cluster of problems requiring multi-sectoral care. Certainly, the retired are a social group with no capacity for social pressure. They are voiceless, specially those in society's poorest sectors, but the lack of care for them may create indirect but unbearable pressure on society as a whole.

Research's specific entry point might be the current situation and future of social security and prevention systems. These systems are of great importance for the elderly, but also concern other social groups. Social security underlies all the critical life transitions discussed this far. Depending on the country, these systems cover pregnancy, illness, accidents, disability, unemployment, retirement and death. They are possibly the only organizations with the highest potential to carry out multi-sectoral social interventions.

AN APPLICATION BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

The possibilities to identify research priorities offered by this methodological proposal may be represented as follows:

ASPECTS OF THE SOCIAL POLICY-MAKING PROCESS

Identification

Institutional aspects and management

Efficiency

Sustainability

Information

Evaluation

Example:

PROBLEMS:

- * Pre-school education and nutrition
- * Minimal abilities: reading, writing, numeracy
- * School failure and repetition
- * School drop-out

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Initial Early social Adult social Retirement
Development Incorporation Integration

CRITICAL LIFE TRANSITIONS

Taking the case of "early social incorporation" as an example, research should focus on identification of those individuals prone to school failure; the sort of educational, nutritional and family preventive or remedial programs that may be developed for them; the way in which these programs can be decentralized; local schools' capacity to apply them; the costs of school drop-out; how to subsidize the programs; the role the private sector can play; how to locally finance programs; the information required for follow-up; the most appropriate indicators; how to gauge the programs' relevance and their later impact on school performance; how to determine whether they are a real social investment.

A methodological proposal to identify research priorities is a way of focusing a problem on reality. The proposal described here considers social policies as one of the government's and society's instruments to promote human development. The proposal supposes that the objective of social policy is not to be cheap, effective or easily applied, but to be ethical -that is, to have human development as its primordial objective. This should certainly not lead us to forget that social policies should pay attention to important economical, political or organizational issues; otherwise they could not meet their objectives.

Attention was focused on how to do things. The purpose of intervention to develop society's human potential was also emphasized. For this reason, a concurrent research focus on human life's key moments -where the few existing resources can make a great difference- was proposed. No assumption has been made on the possible existence of different points of view on this matter. Surely, there must be a variety, because nothing is more controversial than human development. We all have opinions; in the end, there is nothing closer to us than ourselves.

NOTES

1. Consultation included visits to researchers, social research centers and government organizations in Colombia, Peru, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay,
2. Basic documents were requested from ten consultants in Colombia, Chile and Peru: Abugattas (1991), Echeverri (1991), Helfer (1991), Londoño (1991), Rojas (1991), Sojo (1991), Schkolnick (1991), Urrutia (1991), Vergara (1991) and Webb (1991).
3. Three workshops on research priorities were organized with support of the International Development Research Centre - Canada in Peru (July 23 - 24, 1991), Colombia (August 1 - 2, 1991) and Chile (August 12 - 13, 1991). In Peru, the event took place under the auspices of the National Population Council, the Pontificia Universidad Católica and the Universidad del Pacífico. In Colombia, the workshop was organized by FEDESARROLLO, with the collaboration of the National Planning Department. In Chile, it was organized by the Ministry of Planning and Cooperation, with support of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) and the Centro Latinoamericano de Demografía (CELADE). The workshops were attended by researchers, NGO representatives, members of state organizations, planners and politicians.
4. Some examples are the recently-prepared Strategy for Bolivia's Social Development; the Chilean 1990 - 1991 Social Action Plan; Colombia's Development Plan, which includes the social policy component. The concurrence of important foreign aid from bilateral and multi-lateral sources is foreseen for this type of efforts.

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